

Soul of a Dragon

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Summary: Valka missed her son more and more with each passing year. Therefore, she decided to come back to Berk and see him, even if only from afar. / Based on the movies, genre and rating may change as the story develops. Posted on AO3 as well.

## 1. Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I don't own HTTYD.

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><p>Valka Haddock was not a sentimental woman, never had been. She was a Viking, therefore being sentimental had not been included in the package she had been given while growing up. She was kind and often calm, though not unable to experience occasional bursts of anger and stubbornness. And yet, for as long as she could remember, she did not feel she could fit in â€“ neither in her parents' tribe nor in the one she had married into. She had earned the right to be called "Valka the Kind", and it had been the cause of quite a few weird looks and hushed whispers she had received in the past. Apparently, a Viking should never have acted in the way that caused him or her to be called "the Kind".</p>

Valka did not care. And, to her amazement, her husband did not mind either.

They had been happy together, she was not afraid to admit that. It was just the details that had sometimes caused them to argue. However, the details had been so fundamental that in the end they had overshadowed all the good. It had taken her quite a few years to notice that â€“ unfortunately, that had happened much later than it should have.

Would she have fought harder against being carried off if the realisation had come sooner? After all those years, she was unable to

answer that question even when she asked it herself.

So she had focused on what good she could do for the nest, and while years had passed, she had begun to call it her home. It was a good home, and she was finally able to something she deeply believed was right. It calmed her heart and soothed her thoughts, and made her tired enough to sleep without dreams.

She did not like dreams. In them, she saw people she had left behind and things that could have been.

That was why she had been surprised when thoughts about her son had become more and more frequent with each passing year. It had been unsettling at first, and in time they had become the only things she thought about. She spent every single moment of each and every day on thinking what her little boy could look like, what he liked, and how he was treated. He was a real Viking, no doubt about that, a brave and strong boy that would become a warrior worthy of his family, an heir to make his father proud.

He was where he was supposed to be, she kept telling herself. He was happy.

And yet her heart made her think and wonder, and wishing for things she could not have. For example, she could not go back to Berk and see her Hiccup. The main reason was not even the fact that everyone believed she was dead; she would probably not even show her herself to anyone â€“ she would be glad only to see the boy from the distance, and no one had to notice her presence in the woods.

At least that was what she was telling herself; she was unsure herself if she would be able not to speak to her son once she saw him.

The only way she could go to Berk was with Cloudjumper's help, and that was the thing that frightened her most. Her imagination was providing her with various ways her best friend could be killed by the Hooligans, she alongside him in most cases, and the images were horrifying. She knew there were ways of coming to the island unseen, and hiding in the woods were more than easy, but she still feared they would be seen. She was torn between the need to protect Cloudjumper and the desire to see Hiccup, and that inner fight made her doubt the very principles on which she had built her life for the last years. Surely there was no need to endanger both Cloudjumper and herself, surely the boy was happy...

Her heart â€“ which, as it turned out, was sentimental â€“ kept tugging and hurting every time she tried to reason with herself. It neither listened nor relented; it tortured her as long as it was needed for her to give up.

When she did, it felt both amazing and horrible at the same time. Most of all, she had a nagging feeling of betraying dragons that regarded her as a guarantee of their safety. They did not do anything that would give her a reason for such thoughts, so she thought that it was only her guilt speaking to her â€“ constantly, day after day and night after night. She had accumulated quite an amount of guilt in her life, most of which could easily be explained, but she had learnt to live with it. She had learnt to dumb herself every time her considerable reserves of guilt made her remember, but that... That

was new. That was something she did not have time to process, to get used to, and to finally accept. That was something which was going to haunt her thoughts while she was away.

Cloudjumper seemed to understand â€“ he was not thrilled about the prospect of the journey, but did not refuse. Maybe he simply sensed her growing distress and wanted to help â€“ they were friends, after all.

Valka wondered if Hiccup would ever be able to understand that. Her conclusion was depressing, but she forced herself not to care too much about. Instead, she focused on the joy of her journey, on a possibility of seeing her son and â€“ she silently wished â€“ of him understanding her.

If she was courageous enough to approach him at all.

Therefore, almost fifteen years after leaving Berk, Valka was coming back, her head full of buzzing thoughts and impossible hopes, and at the same time clutched tightly in an iron fist of fear.

\* \* \*

><p>Hidden safely in the shadow cast by trees, Hiccup was looking at the village with heavy heart and racing thoughts. His insides were announcing their existence quite constantly and somewhat painfully, and he was sure that it would only get worse. He was supposed to be heading to the ring for just another late night training, and he simply could not force himself to put one feet after another and pretend that he was interested in the dragon training. How could he, after all?</p>

He had always dreamt of having a friend â€“ a single one would suffice â€“ and his dreams had never come true. He was not even aware of how much he craved acceptance and comfort of having someone to confide in, to trust and rely on. He should have been terrified of the fact that he had apparently found that friend in a dragon, but he realised that he did not care. Possible repercussions scared Hiccup out of his wits, but at the same he could not care less what others might think. He found himself on a path of not caring â€“ just as his tribe did not care about him. That destination was still afar, and he was not yet ready to reach it, but foundations of it had been present in his life for quite some time now. They grew with every disappointed scowl and each "Hiccup the Useless" he heard.

They grew enough to make him wonder if maybe life could be better somewhere else. Those thoughts still were only half-formed and thwarted by his sense of duty and the love for his father, but they were getting stronger every day. Recent changes, caused by his success in the ring, were only quickening the process. Although Hiccup knew the Vikings' temperament, he failed to imagine the outrage that would surely break out if the Hooligans knew the reason behind his "way with the beasts".

Hiccup's shoulders slumped as he sighed and began his reluctant way towards the ring. He did not bother to go home and clean himself â€“ Toothless' saliva did not wash out no matter what he tried. He reeked of fish â€“ truth be told, it had recently become a constant â€“ but a distinctive smell of Toothless could also be noticed. Hiccup thought of it as a mixture of warmness and an aroma of moors in the

early spring. He hoped that it was strong enough to cause whichever dragon they were going to face to ignore him. He did not have strength to deal with the reptile if it decided to go after him because he smelt like food.

One could dream.

\* \* \*

><p><em>In the years that followed, Hiccup sometimes looked back and tried to determine what exactly had caused the chaos in the ring that night. Time had blurred them all together in his mind, making him remember only singular images, shattered pieces of a complicated set of events.</em>

\_There had been Fishlegs and the twins, watching everything from a safe distance. There had been Astrid, furiously running around and trying to find a new weapon, because the handle of her axe had been damaged. There had been the Nadder, aggressively defending itself while fear had been shining in its eyes. And, finally, there had been Snotlout, determined to make the best of his only chance to prove himself.\_

\_Sometimes, during long winter nights, Hiccup would sit with Stormfly and scratch her until she purred, curled happily around him. He tried to use that sound to replace memories of horrified screeches and a gut-wrenching sound of bones being shattered, but to no avail.\_

\_During nights like those, he wished he had been quicker.\_

\* \* \*

><p>A sound that Snotlout's mace made in contact with the Nadder's wing caused Hiccup's insides to twist and have an attempt at freedom. The dragon screeched and swayed on its feet, its right wing becoming a tangle of broken bones in mere seconds. Snotlout cheered, swung his mace and hit again, causing the reptile to fall down and cower.</p>

"\_No!\_" Hiccup yelled and ran towards the Nadder. He stopped between it and Snotlout, half-terrified at his own surge of potentially fatal courage. He did not think of consequences, neither did he waste time to imagine what his father's reaction would undoubtedly be. His perception narrowed, allowing his mind to notice only the dragon. His heart broke when the Nadder flinched at his sight, as though it expected him to hurt it as well.

"What the hell are you doing, Hiccup?" Snotlout shouted, his mace dangerously close to Hiccup's face.

"You've done enough," he said. "Now back off."

"Are you mad?!" his cousin's face twisted in confusion, the mace in his hand twitching in rhythm with spasms ravaging his muscles.

"You're defending that... that vermin!"

"You can't kill dragons during the training, Snot!" Hiccup said with frustration, his mind frantically trying to come up with rational explanation for his decision. He could physically feel Astrid's

gaze on him, and tried his best to ignore it. "If you keep beating it, you'll kill it."

"Good!" Snotlout yelled, spitting all over Hiccup's face. "They don't deserve anything else!"

"Snotloutâ€" "

"Calm down, ya two," Gobber grabbed both teenagers by the necks and shoved them away of each other. "Go home, it's over fer tonight."

"It's not over!" Snotlout screamed at the top of his lungs and threw his mace at the dragon. The Nadder flinched and tried to move further away from the humans. Hiccup's heart gave a painful pang at the sight of that. It reminded him too much of how Toothless behaved when he had been lying on the ground, ropes all over hisâ€"

\_Stop\_, Hiccup told himself.

"Yes, it is, now \_get OUT\_!" the smith roared. As Gobber's rage was one of those things that children learnt to avoid soon after learning how to walk, the teenagers left the ring in a hurry, muttering between themselves. Hiccup bit back his terror and forced himself to stay. "And what are ya still doin' 'ere?"

"What are you going to do with it?"

"That's no business of yours," Gobber said and pushed the boy towards the exit. Hiccup stubbornly refused to be moved, which cost him all the strength he could muster. "Get. Out. \_Now\_. "

"Let me deal with it," Hiccup almost begged, his words spoken so quickly that they were almost impossible to understand. "We need a Nadder in our training, and there's no way of knowing when we'll be able to catch another one to replace this one. Andâ€"and it's just a broken wing, I can build something that'll allow it to heal, andâ€" "

"Hiccup..." Gobber said, his voice full of annoyance.

"Gobber, just \_look at it\_," the boy pleaded, all pretence gone from his voice and posture. The Nadder whimpered behind him. "No one deserves to be treated like this. Not even a dragon. Let me take care of it and you won't even have to come close to it."

The smith stood silent for a moment, looking at him in a way Hiccup had never seen before. It made the boy feel uneasy. He was used to being looked down upon, scolded or ignored, but that look... It felt as if Gobber wanted to see into his very soul, and Hiccup was quite certain the results would not make him happy.

"Just like yer mother, aren't ya," the smith quietly said and sighed, his shoulders sagging. Hiccup looked at him, startled beyond belief. Out of many possible reactions he was expecting of Gobber, that was definitely not one of them. It made him be at a loss to an extent he did not believe possible. "Very well, do what you want, I don't care about the beast. But mark my words, lad: if it starts making trouble, you lot won't have to worry 'bout fightin' the Nadders until yer first raid."

As Gobber headed for the exit, Hiccup was entirely sure that his quiet 'Thank you' was left purposely unheard.

## 2. Chapter 2

When Astrid came to the smithy looking for him, Hiccup had already been working since dawn. With Toothless' tail fin already perfected and ready for a test flight, it was possible for him to focus on a sling for the Nadder. His teeth gritted on their own accord every time the dragon came to his mind. His own fierce reaction amazed Hiccup and begged for careful consideration, but he filed that for an unspecified later. He had neither time nor strength to deal with that, not to mention that thinking about possible consequences made him sick.

So he hammered on, wishing that it would help him forget at least temporarily. He kept reminding himself not to think about the Nadder, and those repeated thoughts had become a mantra in his mind, one that saved him from facing reality just a little bit longer.

It was quite difficult for Astrid to shake him out of it, and that did not improve her temper.

"Ah... Astrid!" he stammered, composing himself under her judging gaze. She was furious, and it was partially his fault. "What are you doing here?"

She handed him her axe, and he almost fell over under its weight. "I need it fixed," she simply said. Hiccup had to bite his tongue to avoid commenting the sheer politeness of her request.

"All right," he said instead and got to work without further ado. "Do you want to wait or shall I?"

"I'll wait," she cut him in.

"This is going to take a while."

"I'll wait," she repeated. Hiccup risked a glance at her and was surprised to see that she looked conflicted. Her whole posture seemed to radiate uneasiness and confusion, but he had an impression that it did not lessen her fierce temperament, neither did it make her any less dangerous. All of a sudden, he tried to imagine her as someone else than a warrior and failed miserably.

"Suit yourself," he shrugged and promised himself to keep his mouth shut. It was always better not to antagonise her, and he opted for being extra careful at the moment. Astrid was quiet for a while, but it did not take long for her to get restless. She began pacing around the forge with no other purpose of her action but to kill time. Under normal circumstances, Hiccup would have muttered 'I told you so,', but those were not normal circumstances. She never stayed longer than necessary in the smithy, but he treasured those moments nonetheless. Every single time that happened, he wished he was able to at least talk to her without making a fool of himself. He wished she treated him like an equal. He wished she spoke with him not only when she needed something repaired. He wished he did not feel as if he were invisible while being in her presence.

He wished for things he could not have.

"What's that?" Astrid asked, and he was thankful for having an excuse to look at her. She was holding one of the early versions of Toothless' tail fin, which Hiccup stored to melt and use again later.

His heart, already pounding too rapidly, quickened even more at the sight of the fin. "Uhm..." he mumbled, his mind hastily searching for a plausible explanation. "That's a... personal project of mine. A failed personal project. I need to strip it apart."

"Your 'personal projects' are just as weird as you are," Astrid huffed and put the fin away. Hiccup silently promised himself to thank Odin for that. Later, though, with proper offerings and all that.

"Well," he shrugged, trying to come up with a subject he could talk to her about. "We all have to do something in our free time, don't we? You kill trees, and I..." have a dragon friend, he thought, "tinker."

"I practise," she said in a voice that could freeze entire Berk.

Hiccup raised a brow, suddenly feeling cheeky. "On targets that don't move?" he asked. "Come on, you could do better than that."

"I was doing better than that!" she yelled, and he mentally cursed himself for going too far. He would be lucky if she did not break anything of his. "Then... then suddenly every dragon starts acting like a puppy around you, and there's no training anymore, just... just you showing off and making them behave like pets!"

Hiccup stared at her, all words and thoughts gone from his mind, and Astrid's axe long but forgotten. Was she, Astrid Hofferson, the most promising warrior of their generation, jealous? Of him? He was Hiccup the Useless, the village nuisance, his status of an heir to the chief somehow forgotten amidst everything he had done. He had never avoided taking responsibility for something that had been his fault and had never complained, not once. Not openly. He would have never done that to his father.

And he was not even fighting the dragons, so what was the cause of her jealousy? Everyone knew she was the best.

Astrid. Jealous. Hiccup could not wrap his head around it.

"Well, I can't help that they come after me," he said slowly, carefully weighing his words. "And when they do, I do my best to stay alive."

What he thought to be a polite and reasonable answer, only made Astrid mad. "And how do you even do that?!" she yelled, and he involuntarily took a step back. "You don't fight them and yet they crawl around you like a bunch of pups!"

Hiccup swallowed with difficulty, his dry throat refusing to cooperate. It was a dangerous territory their conversation was

heading into. One that could cost him what was most precious to him. "I just figured out a few tricks, you know. Something that would keep me alive. I can't say my life is wonderful, but I don't want to lose it."

"Tricks!" Astrid repeated in frustration. She approached Hiccup and poked him in the chest. Hard. As hard as only she could. "There is no honour in tricks!"

"As long as they keep me alive," he shrugged, restraining himself from rubbing a sore spot left by her finger. A sliver of annoyance formed inside him as well. "And you know what? If I have to earn my honour by killing a living being, I don't think it's worth it. I see no honour in pointless killing, regardless if it's a human or a dragon."

She repeatedly opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, struck speechless by his words. There he was, contradicting every single one of her beliefs and questioning the very foundations of their society. He was surprised a bit as well, for he had never objected so openly before. He had always bottled up such thoughts, allowed them to grow and nag at him, causing restless nights and dull days. To voice his thoughts would mean facing his father's disappointed scowls, and that was something Hiccup passionately wanted to avoid. It always pained him to cause his father disappointment by nothing more but his mere existence. He deeply craved acceptance and never managed to achieve it. He wanted to please his father and that desire was never fulfilled.

Now, when he partially voiced his profoundly hidden thoughts and hurt feelings, a realisation hit him. Maybe there was nothing wrong with him — maybe it was something about them.—

"This..." Astrid hesitated and shook her head. "This is insane. There's no honour in pointless killing?! Tell that to the families of those who were killed by dragons. Tell that to their children! Odin's beard, tell that to yourself!—"

Hiccup blinked a few times, unsure of what she had in mind. Then it sank in and his mild annoyance turned into anger. "You leave my mother out of this," he said in a cold voice. There was no count of how many times he had already tortured himself over that.

Every time he met a dragon and did not hate it, every time he had an opportunity to hurt it and did not do that, Hiccup's already confused mind and doubtful heart became more and more heavy. It felt like a betrayal and he could not work that out by himself. How could he betray a woman that was dead? A woman he did not remember? Most of the time, he felt nothing when he thought of her. He used to wonder what it would have been like if his mother had been alive, but he stopped doing that a long time ago. There was no point in that, for it had always brought him nothing but misery. But now, when he did not need that unrealistic dreams anymore, thoughts about his mother suddenly started haunting him again.

Should he honour her memory by winning the training? Would she want that? Was she 'a good Viking'?

He did not know. Truth be told, he did not know anything about his mother. Maybe that was the reason why he kept thinking about Gobber's

words. Maybe he should ask his father about it.

If his father were willing to talk to him at all.

"Then start acting like a Viking!" Astrid yelled. Her voice managed to catch attention of a few passers-by, and Hiccup grimaced at the amount of gossip that was surely going to appear because of their quarrel. Admittedly, he should have led her to his study as soon as it had become obvious that an argument was inevitable. However, with all the drawings of Toothless and designs of his tail fin scattered all over that tiny room, it would have probably been the worst decision in Hiccup's life.

"What I act like is my own business, not yours," he growled, trying to keep his voice down. Some part of him was wriggling in an iron grasp of misery. Why did they always have to quarrel? Why was it impossible for them to have a normal relationship?

"It is mine in the ring!" she shouted, seemingly oblivious to the group of villagers that began to gather outside the smithy. "I fight for my honour and a good name of my family, and you get in the way!\_"

That was something he was familiar with far better than he would have liked. He always got in the way. This time, somehow, it struck more painfully than any of the previous ones. Maybe it happened because it was her who told him that. Or maybe it was simply the last straw.

He needed to go out there and keep flying until he could lie to himself that it stopped hurting.

"You know what?" he said in a falsely cheerful tone. "You can win the training, I don't care. Just don't expect me to do nothing if the dragons come after me. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to repair your axe. I'll have it brought to you when it's done."

She possibly wanted to retort, but he purposely turned away from her and picked up the forgotten axe. He heard her storming out of the smithy and tried to pretend that his heart did not just break into pieces.

\* \* \*

><p>Everything was irrelevant â€“ his worries and fears and obligation caused by his father's departure. Astrid's axe lay in the smithy, unfinished and forgotten â€“ it did not matter. There was a training session happening right at that moment â€“ he did not care, neither about his absence nor about possible repercussions he might face.</p>

Hiccup and Toothless were flying, and nothing else mattered.

Not even the fact that they had almost died a while ago and Hiccup promised himself not to get cocky. At least not now. Maybe later, when he and Toothless got used to each other.

There was definitely going to be a 'later'. Having discovered what it was like to fly, Hiccup was not going to give it up. Having found something that made him happy, he was going to fight to keep

it.

Having made a friend, Hiccup was going to protect Toothless as best as he could. Struck by a sudden pang of an undefined feeling that he could describe only as strangely warm, he scratched the Fury's head, receiving a contented growl in return.

I have befriended a dragon, he told himself again, curious to see if that sentence lost its astonishing vibe. As it turned out, it did not. Every time he thought about that, it felt equally bizarre.

The dragon in question did not seem to mind having befriended a human either.

Conditions were perfect for flying — such a cloudless sky had not been seen in a long while. Hiccup did not know that so much could be seen from above. They had to maintain a high altitude to avoid being spotted from the ground so the temperature was significantly lower, but Hiccup did not mind. When it was possible to experience something so wonderful, a little bit of chilly air became insignificant.

All of a sudden, he tried to imagine the look on

(Astrid's)

everyone's faces if they saw him. His imagination, which was usually so vivid, failed him, causing merely a fit of laughter. Toothless looked back at him with one of those goofy expressions of his — Hiccup settled for believing that it was amusement and a little bit of interest this time — and let out a happy roar. Hiccup could not help but smile, feeling utterly carefree. Here and now, nothing mattered. Here and now, his heart was light, whole and unscarred.

Sunset was already near when he heard a faint echo of an unspecified sound being carried over the sea. Toothless growled, suddenly alert, and it was enough to set Hiccup's nerves on edge as well. He was not stupid to dismiss the Fury's reaction.

"What is it, bud?" he asked, his words almost unrecognisable because of his cold lips. He had to make himself a helmet.

Toothless growled again and changed course — now, instead of their previous destination, they were heading back to Berk. It was not exactly the place Hiccup wanted to see

(anymore)

right now — he did hope for a longer flight — but he did not argue. Whatever caught Toothless' attention, Hiccup realised he should investigate. With his absent father, he should be the one to take care of the village, and that meant finding out about possible threats.

Not that anyone would ever listen to me, he thought, bitterness creeping into his thoughts. He did not delude himself that their sudden affection towards him would last forever. Nothing good ever did.

Toothless unexpectedly jolted upwards, flying almost vertically towards the clouds above them. Hiccup gripped the saddle and flattened himself on the dragon's back as much as he could. He had already found out what it was like to slip off the saddle. Experiencing that once was enough for one day.

They were flying in circles for a while, slowly and quietly, with nothing but clouds around them. Hiccup had no idea what Toothless was looking for, but the golden light of the setting Sun made him wish that the dragon found it quickly. It was getting colder with each passing minute and the air had that particular taste of an approaching snowstorm. The winter would probably come sooner than expected. Hiccup's mind involuntarily busied itself with thoughts about the village. His father should be there now, making sure they were prepared and well-stocked for the months to come. Instead, he was somewhere at sea, chasing ghosts of impossible assumptions and misplaced priorities.

A sudden surge of anger clouded Hiccup's thoughts. Anger, which was directed at his father and, at the same time, no one in particular. He did feel like that a lot lately, and it was a state of mind he was not overly fond of.

Toothless' soft growl brought Hiccup back to reality. It sounded... concerned, even worried, and that caused a strong pang of affection in him. He reached out and placed a hand on the dragon's head. "I'm fine, bud," he said with a smile, his voice quiet and calm. "I'm fine. Did you find whatever you were looking for?"

The Night Fury growled again and slowly approached the clouds' edge. Hiccup looked down, confused and unsure whether he would see anything. His worries were justified — there was nothing else but trees and a couple of hills down there. Not a single detail could be made out on this altitude. Hiccup was not sure, but he suspected that those hills were the ones he used to climb when he was a child. They were not steep, but their height was considerable — and yet they looked like mere rocks from above.

"There's nothing, bud," he said. "Are you sure there's anything to look for?"

Toothless groaned and jerked his head to the left. Hiccup looked again in that direction, taking in all the trees and hills and —

He froze, coldness and anger forgotten as though they were never there. Something was moving above the sea, appearing and disappearing behind the cliffs, something big enough to be seen even from here. It was a mere silhouette, a shadow on the surface of the cliffs, but it could be seen nonetheless. And with the way it moved...

"Thor almighty," Hiccup whispered. He had a feeling that his blood froze. "It's a dragon."

### 3. Chapter 3

A/N: First of all, I'd like to thank all of you who read the story. You are awesome :).\_

\_Second, as it's impossible to reply to a guest's review, here it is: there is no update schedule. I write my stories when I have time, usually on my way to and from work, and I post a new chapter once it's finished. So to answer your question, dear Guest: yes, there will be mother/son interactions, but I won't rush them. The story has its pace, and they will happen when it's time for them.\_

\_And last but not least, I'd like to wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year. May it be better than the one that's just ended.\_

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><p>Hiccup's thoughts were racing as he ran towards the Great Hall. He was trying to come up with what he wanted to tell the tribe. Every single idea for the announcement was discarded, leaving him with nothing but the news itself.</p>

\_There is a wild dragon near the Black Heart Bay\_, he could say.  
\_Please, stay away from there until it's gone.\_

He knew his tribe well enough to realise that they would form a hunting party after something like that. Every scenario he had already come up with would have exactly the same result. Maybe there was simply no good way of relaying the news like that. Not when the first reaction of

\_(his people)

his tribesmen was to run straight at dragons, instead of letting both sides be. Maybe burns, wounds and casualties were inevitable regardless of how much he wanted to avoid them. Hiccup could not help but think that as much as wanted to keep the Hooligans safe, he was unable to do much if they did not cooperate. And cooperate they did not.

A tiny, but persistent worm of doubt boring Hiccup's mind suggested that maybe the Vikings were not the ones he wanted to keep safe. Maybe he should simply say nothing at all.

As he climbed the stairs leading to the Great Hall, Hiccup told the worm to shut up. He did not need distractions at that moment.

Since when had it all become so difficult?

He sighed, composed himself and pushed the door open, expecting the usual evening murmur of voices and laughs, a symphony of sounds to which he could never tune in. Instead of that, there was a crowd inside, the crowd that consisted of far too many Vikings. There was not even that many people left in the village, something must haveâ€"

Then Hiccup spotted a familiar red-headed man and it hit him â€“ his father and his crew had returned. His heart was immediately torn in two with strength that surprised Hiccup immensely. One part was glad to see Stoick; it radiated warm waves of happiness caused by the fact that his father was safe and unhurt. The other part, terrified beyond its wits, wanted to take Toothless and run as far away as possible.

To Hiccup's relief, his reasonable mind won the battle with panic by observing that the Hooligans were unusually quiet. No fight was happening, no mug was being broken, no drunken Viking was falling from a bench onto the floor.

Something's wrong, was all Hiccup could think about as he made his way through the crowd. Stoick was staring at the map of Berk, apparently focused solely on that piece of paper. The frown on his face was a fuel to the fire of Hiccup's racing thoughts and unanswered suspicions.

"Uhm... hi, dad. I didn't know you're back," he said quietly, still unsure whether coming to the Great Hall was a good idea. Stoick blinked and looked at his son, surprise and

(relief)

something unusual reflected briefly in his eyes. Then the usual disappointed scowl followed, and Hiccup's heart twisted in a painful grip of misery, its initial leap of joy short-lived and already forgotten.

"I'll deal with ya later," Stoick said and returned his gaze to the map, and that made Hiccup certain that Gobber had already told the chief that his son had missed the training session without any explanation. "Go home and wait there."

The boy forced himself to stay in spite of his instinct and common sense. He squashed them with all his might. He needed to at least try.

"Dad, there's something you need to know," he said and winced, disgusted at how desperately his voice sounded. He cleared his throat and composed himself as much as he could. "It concerns the whole tribe, and you always said I need to think about the tribe first, so I did andâ€"

"Stop!" Stoick yelled. Hiccup could not help but think that there was unusual distress hidden beneath his father's anger, and that was something he had never noticed before. "Just say what ya gotta say. And make it quick."

Hiccup gathered his thoughts, getting rid of all of his previously thought-out scenarios. With all of them being bad, improvising could not be much worse. "A wild dragon chose the Black Heart Bay as its hunting ground," he hastily said in a voice he hoped to be sufficiently indifferent. "I think we should avoid it until that dragon's gone."

Something akin to hunger appeared in Stoick's eyes. He reached out and put a hand on his son's shoulder. The grip was surprisingly gentle. "The Black Heart Bay, you say?" he said, his voice heavy with conflicted emotions. "What did it look like? Was it alone?"

"Well, I saw only one dragon, but there might be more," Hiccup answered, a horrible sick feeling lodging itself in his stomach. Something was definitely wrong, and he was starting to think that he should have run away with Toothless after all. "I wasn't close enough to see the details, but it's big. Bigger than any of those that usually raid us."

"I wouldn't dream of Night Furies to be small," Stoick hissed with satisfaction, and Hiccup felt those words as they were a hammer that hit him in the head. Everything around him swirled and became blurry, his blood running cold as terror swept over him.

"Whatâ€"what?" he stuttered. No care was left in him to keep up appearances. "What are you talking about?"

"There's a Night Fury somewhere nearby," the chief announced. "We heard it on our way back, and now we know where it is. Thanks to you," he finished, his surprise obvious to everyone.

Hiccup's mind raced, trying to recall whether or not Toothless had roared or growled or given any other sound during their test flight. He could not remember anything, not with all those buzzing thoughts in his head, which alongside his pounding heart merged into one mantra impossible to resist.

Get Toothless to safety, ordered the rhythm of his heart, and thoughts in his head responded in kind. Hiccup's common sense, usually so distinctive in every other situation, could not make itself clear enough to be heard, let alone heeded.

"Dad, you need to think this through," Hiccup said, some of the panic he felt clearly audible in his voice. He did not care. "It's just a wild dragon that's probably out of fish in its usual hunting ground. Let's just... leave it be, dad. If it wanted to hurt us, we'd already be under attack. Let's not risk anyone's life when it's not necessary."

A murmur of agreement ran through the crowd. Hiccup had a feeling that it had more to do with the unexplainable fear of the Night Furies than with the appreciation of his concern for everyone's safety. As long as they did not decide to go after that dragon, he was glad of that no matter the reason.

"I will not have any kind of wild dragons on this island!" Stoick roared, causing Hiccup to take a step back. And somehow, without any understandable explanation, his head cleared and his thoughts calmed down. A plan formed itself in the boy's mind, a plan that could work surprisingly well, and Hiccup was not a person to discard a potentially good plan.

It was also reckless, but he knew that a simple reasoning would never reach Stoick when the dragons were concerned.

"Dad, killing every single dragon won't bring mum back," Hiccup said. His father froze, his hands clenching into fists on their own accord. "Unnecessary death are all you'll achieve."

Silence and tension fell upon the Great Hall. Everyone was watching father and son as though they were the centre of the universe. And in that moment, if the universe reduced itself to Berk only, they were indeed.

"Ya know nothing," Stoick said in a voice that was almost an unintelligible growl. "Don't presume ya do."

"You're right, I don't," Hiccup agreed. "Mostly because you never

told me. But you know what, dad? I don't think she would've wanted this."

It was a win-or-lose gambit, based on mere scraps of information he had gathered in the last two days. Those scraps were like a puzzle with unknown number of pieces, most of which were missing and those which had been found were not making any sense. So he bet on a gut feeling.

And, apparently, won.

"I've spent the last fourteen years trying to avenge 'er," Stoick said after a long while of silence that was heavy with possibilities. "Trying to make all of that a little bit less in vain by raising ya to be a good Viking, and..."

\_And you failed\_, Hiccup thought, absolutely certain that he was going to hear precisely those words. They were nothing new, he had already repeated them to himself on countless occasions. And with that in mind, he thought he was prepared. He thought he had numbed himself enough.

Reality proved him wrong.

"Yer not a Viking, Hiccup, not in yer heart," his father finally continued, and Hiccup did not know that hearing something he had been aware of for a long time could be so painful. "And we're going to deal with that dragon the Viking way. If ya don't like it, stand aside. And I'm telling it as yer chief, not yer father."

There it was, a way out Hiccup so desperately craved. And yet, when it was necessary to choose, he hesitated. Confronted with the finality of such choice, he wanted someone else to make the choice for him.

\_Toothless\_, his heart whispered, and suddenly there was no choice at all.

He turned around and walked away. Stunned gazed and incredulous silence followed him to the very threshold of the Great Hall.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup knew better than to leave in the middle of a night, especially when it was more than certain that his father was about to lecture him on how to be a Viking one more time. Disappearing before Stoick came home, furious as he undoubtedly was going to be, would only draw unnecessary attention to Hiccup. Which, given the circumstances, was the last thing he needed.</p>

To Hiccup's surprise, Stoick was unusually quiet and calm when he came home, his beard and furrowed brows full of grey hair which amount had previously slipped the boy's attention. Deep down, he realised that he might simply not have cared, and that thought frightened him.

All of a sudden, leaving home lost all its previous appeal.

"There's some fish soup left if you want," he offered when the silence became unbearable. In silence, his resolve tended to

falter.

"I already ate in the Great Hall."

"Well, in that case..." Hiccup's words trailed away as he found himself unsure of what to say. He waved his hand in a gesture of undefined purpose, and opted for going upstairs. He should get some rest before tomorrow came and made him face the rest of his life.

"Hiccup?" his father's quiet voice stopped him in his tracks. He glanced behind only to see that Stoick was sitting by the fire, his shoulders hunched and his gaze transfixed on something only he could see. "The reason why I never told ya about yer mother's because yer too much like her than I would've liked."

Hiccup sat down on the stairs, holding his breath and trying not to move, as if the smallest gesture could change Stoick's mind about speaking of his deceased wife.

"She was trying to make the tribe stop killing dragons, or at least avoid them, until one day a beast came for you and I had to choose whom to save."

The boy's heart sank when hopeful thoughts he was not aware of having died as though they were never there. "And instead of a real Viking," he said slowly, wondering at the turn their conversation took so quickly, "I grew into me."

"Ya grew into someone with potential," Stoick corrected with a surprising ferocity. "Yer just wasting it on the same delusions that got yer mother killed. Ya should remember that next time ya think we should let a dragon live."

"How long can we go on like that, dad?" Hiccup asked, now more than ever certain that every attempt at reasoning with his father was destined to fail. "How long until all that's left of us are children and those who are no longer able to fight? We can't just throw ourselves at every dragon we see."

Stoick averted his gaze from the wall to finally look at his son. Hiccup was surprised to see that there was no disappointed scowl this time, only utter tiredness. "It's what we always did and we'll continue to do," the chief said. "Ya should come to terms that yer gonna be joining us soon. I will not have my heir stand by like a child too small to carry an axe."

The boy stood up to look his father in the eyes. "Will you ever care for what I have to say in this matter?"

"I don't have a luxury to do that. Neither do you."

Hiccup turned around and climbed the stairs without another word. Denial boiled beneath his skin and inside his stomach, making his hands tremble and his eyes water with tears. He bit them back, knowing that there was no reason to weep anymore.

Dawn found him heading towards the forest with determination to disappear before anyone thought of starting to look for him. And, as the winter quietly came during the night, snow gradually covered his

tracks as if they were never there.

#### 4. Chapter 4

Valka sat on the hilltop as the snow kept falling quietly around her.

She was looking at

(her old)

Stoick's house, a small oasis of light clutched in a cold winter grasp. Heart in her chest felt... constrained, heavy with nostalgia and longing she could not remember harbouring. Had she expected that, she would not have come here so soon after arriving at Berk. At least that was what she told herself.

Much to her surprise, she realised that she was unwilling to accept those feelings. They begged for her attention and consideration, but she tried her best to push them out of her thoughts. Considering them would mean to question the way of life she led for the last fourteen years. Life she perceived as satisfying. Life she loved. Life she chose deliberately.

When Valka decided to visit Berk, she never wanted that decision to make her doubt herself. In the end, she knew she would choose to change absolutely nothing in the way the things were. There was no possibility of returning from what she was doing. There was nothing to return to.

She straightened her back and forced her mind to think about something else entirely. Hatchlings, for example. There were so many of them this year, and they were soon going to learn to fly. It was always chaotic when they did that, and although she had her hands full when that time came, it also happened to be the time that brought her most joy.

She tried to suppress a sickening suspicion that those were the moments when she felt like a mother.

And there she was, lost in thoughts that made her miserable. Again.

Valka rose to her feet, anger boiling under the surface of her heart, ready to overheat and explode. She should not have come here. She should have stayed in the nest, content with her life and her actions. She should not have given up to a temporary craving. She should have been stronger.

A noise, unusually loud in this cold winter morning, caught her attention and made her glance at the house. She did so and froze, her mind finally quiet. A boy was struggling to open the door, covered with snow almost to one-third of its height. He was short and scrawny, dressed in completely Viking clothes that could not be more unfit for the current weather. He closed the door and stood there for a while as if considering something. A decision must have been made, because he quickly turned away from the house and walked towards the forest, not too far from where Valka was.

She shook off her shock and crouched in the snow, hoping not to be seen. Her thoughts raced, more chaotic than before. Could it be her boy? Her tiny, prematurely born boy? Or maybe Stoick had simply married another woman after Valka's disappearance and that was one of their children? She had long but accepted the thought of

(her husband)

Stoick with another woman.

The boy was climbing the hill with determination, and she watched as he did that. He was too far away for her to see his face clearly, not to mention that her sight was not as acute as it used to be. She decided to follow him, at least as long as she could remain unseen. She was afraid that the snow crunching beneath her feet would give her away, but her fears were misplaced — the boy was lost in thoughts and focused solely on walking straight ahead. She admired his determination — wherever he was going to, it must have been worth having his boots soaked through. Her lips involuntarily curved into a smile — he was as stubborn as she was, and...

She shook her head and told herself to think only about walking through the snow. She could not assume that that boy was her son, and it would be foolish to get her hopes up when they could yet be crushed.

The boy moved through the forest with stunning familiarity — even blue winter dawn was not enough to make him doubt his path. Valka struggled to keep up the pace. It had been many years since she had last put her feet in those forest and, of course, she was more used to flying than walking those days. That thought made her stop for a moment. When did that happen? Did she really drift that far away from human society? Was she really discarding bits and pieces of her humanity, so that there was more of a dragon in her than it was of a human?

If she decided to approach her son once she found him, how could she show herself to him when she doubted her own humanity? If he responded with disgust, her already damaged heart would probably break to pieces.

She swallowed back doubts and fears, and resumed following the boy. There was neither need nor time for premature assumptions, as they would only cloud her judgement and cause her time-consuming misery. She was already shocked that she experienced more conflicted feelings in the last day than she had in all those years. She was exhausted and aggravated, and missed her quiet nest with every fibre of her body and soul.

The boy suddenly stopped and looked around, making Valka hide hastily behind a tree. She peeked carefully from behind it, unsure whether to stay there or run. Did he hear her? Was she that obvious and loud without Cloudjumper's aid? Her fear subsided when she noticed that the boy was not looking in her direction. He just stopped for a while, looking around avidly as though making sure that no one was around, no matter where they might come from. Valka wondered for a moment what caused his early stroll. Could it be something for Stoick? A test the boy decided to undergo to prove something to himself?

Valka realised she was probably too curious for her own good.

After making sure that whatever he feared was not in the vicinity, the boy walked behind the giant tree he was standing nearby, and, seemingly, disappeared. Valka blinked, confused, and waited a while for him to reappear. When that did not happen, she walked towards the tree, as quietly as she could in such circumstances. The boy was nowhere to be seen, but she did not want to risk exposing herself. Potential consequences were... unimaginable.

Her caution turned out to be unnecessary. Valka walked around the tree where it was possible to do so, but she did not meet the boy. She looked around, confused, unwilling to believe that the boy might have fallen into a precipice that opened beneath roots of the tree. It seemed too bizarre to be true, especially when the boy was so familiar with the surroundings. She considered heading back to the beach where Cloudjumper was supposed to wait for her, but a burst of laughter somewhere from below made her stop. She crept to the edge of the precipice glanced down and cursed herself inwardly for her own stupidity. What she believed to be the precipice, turned out to be a deep, broad cove she almost ignored.

She would have laughed if she had not been so embarrassed with herself.

She crouched in snow and leant over the edge, trying to get a good look of the cove. A lake in the middle of it was not frozen yet, but it was going to happen sooner rather than later. The rest of the cove was already completely white, covered in snow that was getting thicker with each passing hour. It was easy to spot the boy on the other side of the cove. He was talking, frantically waving his hands in the air in an over-dramatic manner he was probably unaware of. Valka could not make out his words as the wind carried merely the sound of his voice.

However, a dragon the boy was apparently talking to was perfectly visible in the snow.

Her thoughts stopped, so did her breathing. Before she could even comprehend what she was doing, she climbed down the roots of the tree only to stop dead in her tracks at the bottom of the cove, terrified at what she just did. She should not have done it, she should have waited, she should haveâ€"

The dragon caught her smell and rose to its feet, causing the boy to look at her and freeze in what seemed to be panic. Valka, on the other hand, could not help but sigh at the sight of those two. There he was, the boy she suspected to be her son, with a dragon he did not seem to be afraid of, and there was the dragon that apparently was not inclined to attack the boy at all.

If anything, it focused its bright green eyes on \_her\_.

"Toothless, no!" the boy yelled the same second the dragon lurched forwards. Valka had a moment to marvel at the boy's choice of name for the dragon before she crouched and readied herself, a long forgotten feeling of nervousness lodging itself in her stomach. She had never faced a night fury before, but she did not have to think about it now. It was just another dragon that was going to learn she meant no harm. They all did in the end.

The boy, of course, had no knowledge of that. She realised that when he ran towards her and pushed her from the dragon's way. It took her by surprise, and that was the only reason why he succeeded. If Valka had resisted, he would have not succeeded. Not with his meek strength.

"It's all right," she said hastily, taking a few steps back. Why was her voice so hoarse? "I mean you no harm."

The boy looked at her suspiciously, and Valka's heart leapt at the sight of the boy's green eyes. Stoick's eyes were of the same colour, the greenness of fresh grass in spring. "Who are you?" he asked, his hands instinctively patting the dragon's head.

"I'm... I was just..." she shook her head, unable to think of a plausible excuse. Therefore she opted for an easy way out â€“ she turned her attention to the dragon. "He's beautiful! I've never seen a night fury up close before."

"Uhm... thanks?" the boy half-laughed, half-coughed. She could tell he was nervous and unsure how to behave. She did not blame him, she would have felt the same had she been in his position. The dragon, on the other hand, stopped growling, sat down and stared at her with curiosity. "I'm sorry, but who are you? You can't be from Berk."

She tilted her head to the side, a move that was too draconian to her liking but one she could not unlearn. "Why do you think so?" she asked, lightly amused by conviction she heard in his voice.

"I've never seen you before," the boy shrugged and glanced at his dragon. "And if you were a Viking. you wouldn't have acted like you did after seeing Toothless."

Valka thought that the name, although adorable, was utterly unfitting. "You are a Viking," she pointed out, which cased him to scratch his neck in a manner that was an obvious sing of nervousness.

"Not a very good one," he mumbled, and she immediately noticed shame underlying his words. She would not have if she had not known it herself. It had taken her many years to finally let go of that shame, to come to a realisation that she could be a good person without being a good Viking.

The dragon purred and nudged the boy in an attempt of comfort. Valka's mouth curved into a smile on their own accord. "I think he doesn't mind," she suggested and the boy laughed. The sound of that warmed her heart in a way nothing before did.

"No, he doesn't," he admitted in a voice full of hurt that contrasted with the laugh he let out mere seconds earlier. The night fury â€“ Toothless, Valka reminded herself â€“ nudged the boy in a way she knew was supposed to be comforting. She opened her mouth to ask the boy about his name, but he spoke before she could even start. "I'm sorry, I must go, there's a dragon I must take care of before the villagers do. It was nice to meet you... whoever you are."

A terrible feeling lodged itself in Valka's stomach. Loki always seemed to play his cruel jokes on her, so why would this time be any

different? "What are you talking about? \_Where?\_"

The boy gave her a questioning look. "There's a wild dragon in the vicinity of the Black Heart Bay, my father wantsâ€"what?" he asked when she grabbed him by a shoulder.

"That is my dragon!" she said forcefully and looked around as if searching for a solution. There was no possibility of getting to the Black Heart Bay in time, not on foot and without Cloudjumper.

Oh, Cloudjumper. Why did she allow herself to let him stay behind?

She noticed that the boy stared at her with judging expression on his face. After a while he seemed to come to a conclusion, because he jumped onto the night fury's back and held out a hand to her. "Come on," he said calmly. "I trust you know how to stay on a dragon's back when it's flying?"

She laughed, she could not help herself. She spent the last fourteen years flying on dragons' backs, and she most likely knew more about them than the boy could dream of. And, although he did not know it, his question could not possibly be any more stupid.

"Of course I do," she said merrily and seated herself behind the boy's back. And oh the mighty gods in AsgÃ¶rd, there was a saddle. Why had she never thought of that?

"Hold on tight," the boy said and before she could answer, Toothless was already in the air, his wings beating with more force than she would ever expect in such a small, nimble dragon. She wrapped his hands around the boy's waist, for the angle with which they were flying upwards was not one she was accustomed to. However, flying itself was a different matter entirely and, as always, it brought her joy and stilled her thoughts.

"So," the boy said as soon as they were safely hidden in the clouds, "who are you anyway? You didn't answer when I asked before."

"My name's... Gerd," she said, having come to a decision that it was better not to reveal her real name before she knew for sure that the boy was her Hiccup. Frigg only knew how badly Valka wanted that. "I came to see how the village changed. I used to live here once."

"You did?" he asked. "Well, I can't blame you for leaving."

She realised that there was probably more than one reason for him to say that. She just hoped it was not something akin to the treatment she had been receiving while she had lived on Berk. A child would probably not take well such hardships.

"I take it from your tone that there's a history to your words," she said.

The boy stiffened visibly but did not say anything to confirm her suspicions. On the other hand, his silence was enough. "So what is your name?", she finally forced herself to ask the question she was dreading to vocalise. Disappointment was bound to follow its answer no matter what it was. If he was not her son, she would be disappointed that he did not grow to be this wonderful young man who

befriended a dragon no matter his upbringing as a Viking. But if he \_was\_...

That would mean she failed him.

"I'm Hiccup Haddock," he said, unaware that her world shattered around her after his calm and simple answer. "Pleased to meet you."

Valka closed her eyes to stop tears from falling and remembered the last time she held her son in her arms. He had been almost a year old then, already having lived longer than she had expected him to. Now, fourteen years later, she once again wrapped her arms around him, still thin and small, a complete contradiction of the image she had envisioned. Instead of a strong, simple-minded young Viking she found her son to be like her, both in looks and in spirit. She recalled his face and except the eyes, she could see nothing of Stoick in him.

She had spent the last fourteen years away from him, while she should have come back to take care of him.

Maybe she should have come back to take him \_with\_ her.

"Let's get lower, bud," he said to the dragon. "We should be far enough from the village."

Toothless warbled happily and descended below the cloud base. The snowfall stopped for a while and the Black Heart Bay was perfectly visible from that altitude. Something painful twitched in Valka's chest when she saw no sign of Cloudjumper. The Sun was rising, bathing the sea in its light, but it cast no stormcutter shadow.

"We can't be too late," she whispered. "He would've come looking for me if there was any sign of a hunting party."

"He's your dragon," Hiccup shrugged when they landed on a sandy beach. Toothless sniffed the sand and growled. "You know him best."

She looked around to searched for potential hiding spots and was relieved to find at least a couple of them. "He was hunting when I left," she said. "It was before dawn, he must've landed somewhere to rest after the night."

"Well, there's no harm in waiting a couple of minutes," the boy shrugged and looked at the night fury, which was still growling with no apparent reason. "What's wrong, bud?"

Toothless looked around and focused his gaze on one of stone pillars that were standing a few metres from the shore. The pillars, usually crowded with seagulls, were now unusually empty and silent. Valka looked in that direction as well, but she could see no details of whatever nested on the pillars. However, there was something definitely \_moving\_ \_there\_, and, as she watched, it dislodged itself from the rocks and began moving towards them. After a moment she recognised a distinctive shape of a stormcutter, and it made her heart light with relief. She would never forgive herself if he was harmed because of her whim.

"Wow," Hiccup said in awe despite Toothless' worried growls. "He's big."

"Far from being the biggest one, trust me," she laughed and greeted Cloudjumper as he landed. "We should leave, it's best not to tempt the Norns by staying too long when there's a hunting party coming towards us."

"Yeah," the boy agreed, warily watching the two dragons that apparently were unsure whether to fight or to greet each other. "I guess so. Come on, bud. We should... we should go."

Valka watched him mounting his dragon before her brain caught up his words. "Hiccup, wait," she said quickly. "Is there... somewhere safe we can talk?"

He looked at her, surprised. "Yeah, sure, let's go back to the cove, we can talk there."

She nodded and climbed Cloudjumper's back with the usual help he gave her. She did not need it, but it had become a part of their routine in which she found not a small amount of comfort.

"So," Hiccup called once they were in the air again, "what type of dragon is he? I've never seen one before."

"It's a stormcutter," she replied with a smile. "They live on the mainland, he must've been caught in some queen's or alpha's calling to venture this far north."

"Alpha?" the boy asked, fascination shining in his eyes. Valka smiled happily — she had never expected to be able to have that kind of conversation about dragons with her son.

"Every dragon nest has certain structure, and on top of it is usually the queen," she explained. "However, there are times when a nest's got an alpha, a king of all dragons living in it. There's one in my nest, a bewilderbeast. A truly magnificent creature."

Hiccup blinked a few times, his gaze transfixed on her. "You live in a \_nest\_? A dragon nest?", he asked with incredulity, and she laughed at it. It was so... adorably ignorant.

"Yes, I do," she admitted, her mind indulging itself in thoughts of her son deciding to live with her, of how much she could teach him and for how much lost time she would be able to make up to him. The very first person who did not think her to be mad turned out to be her own son. The gods be blessed for their little gifts.

"How's that possible?" he asked, rubbing his neck. "I mean, I realise now that 'the dragon will always go for the kill' attitude couldn't be more untrue, but... they're still dragons. And you're human."

This time Valka laughed, openly and joyfully. He was exactly like she ad been all those years ago. "There's much more to them," she said after he gave an undignified huff. "I had \_years\_ to learn and gain their trust, and it's been worth every single day."

\_(I could teach you if you want\_.)\_

He did not reply to that and was quiet all the way back to the cove. She did not push him to talk when he so obviously did not want to, nor did she pry reasons of his silence from him. If he wanted, she hoped he would tell her, no matter how foolish such hopes were. She was no one to him, not yet anyway. If the gods were willing, maybe she could play this in a way that would allow her to regain the son she had decided to abandon.

And she had to start doing things right. Immediately.

"Hiccup?" she asked when they landed in the cove. He looked at her with interest, hundreds upon hundreds of unvoiced questions visible in his eyes. "There's something I need toâ€œI mean, I..."

\_Oh, be a Viking and get on with it, woman\_, she scolded herself for such an unwelcome hesitation.

"When we met and you asked my name, I... I lied," she finally said, and her heart twisted at the sight of suspicions forming on his face. "I think I was afraid you wouldn't speak with me if I told you at the start."

"Told me what?" Hiccup asked warily, the tone of his voice making Toothless wrap his tail protectively around the boy's legs.

"My name's not Gerd," she replied, trying to ignore Cloudjumper's worried growl. She took a deep breath before continuing, praying to all the gods that could be listening to make this work. "It's Valka ÆslfsdÃ³ttir."

"That was my mother's name," he said and blinked. And then he looked her straight in the eye and went pale. "What are youâ€œ"

"I'm your mother, Hiccup."

End  
file.